MUNI MEMO TO YOU

50 GOLDEN YEARS

The flag was filled out to 48 stars with the admission of New Mexico and Arizona to statehood. Woodrow Wilson was elected president. War raged in the Balkans—and fashionable ladies of the day wore clothes styled after the uniforms of the belligerent armies. Other women were marching on state capitols in an effort to gain the right to vote. The New York Giants were denying rumors the team was for sale and Jack Johnson reigned king of the heavyweight fisticuffers.

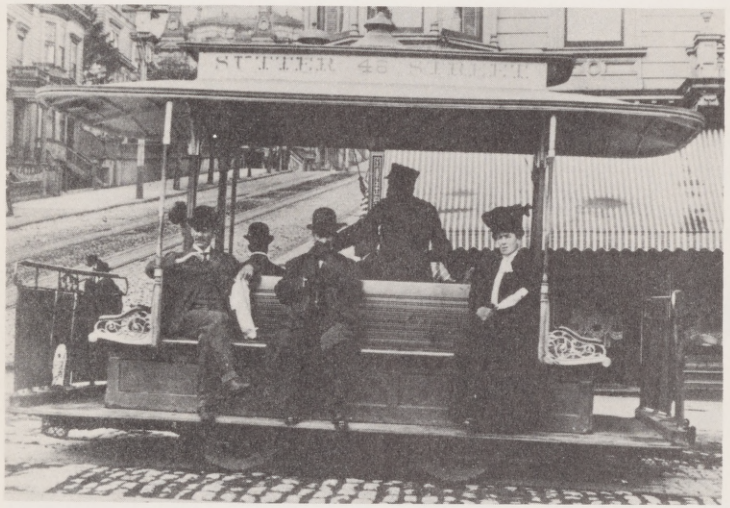
In San Francisco automobile dealers were advertising open-aired touring cars for $305 and a steamship line offered a roundtrip to Honolulu for $110. The most destructive earthquake and fire in history of half a dozen years before was all but forgotten; plans were rushed for a new City Hall and the most exciting topic of conversation was the forthcoming Panama Pacific International Exposition. Work on the new municipally-owned railway was winding up, and many wondered if it would be in operation by year's end. The year was 1912 and it just barely did become the Municipal Railway's natal year: At exactly 12:00 o'clock noon on Saturday, December 28, a

group of 10 brand-new "California-type" streetcars proudly pulled out of the carbarn at Geary and Presidio and headed east down Geary Street.

At the confluence of Kearny, Geary and Market Streets a small ceremony had been planned for 12:30. Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph had been deliberate in insisting that inauguration of Muni service be scaled down, rather than blown up. "Let's get the cars going all right first and toot our horn afterward" was the way he put it.

But the Mayor failed to foresee the citizenry enthusiasm that long before the appointed time had overflowed to such an extent that an expectant throng estimated at 50,000 had filled the five-pronged intersection, effectively bringing all traffic movements to a stop by noon on that great day.

This is a Sutter Street cable car pictured at the turn of the century. It was one of the first lines to "modernize" after Halladie's cable car became so successful. At its inception in 1877, this line ran between Sansome and Larkin Streets. Later it was extended to Presidio Avenue.



And when he boarded the first car, deposited one of the first 40 nickels produced by the San Francisco Mint, and took over the controls, happy bedlam broke loose: The crowd roared, the siren on the roof of the St. Francis Hotel shrieked, the musicians of the Municipal Band strained to bring music into the din. Souvenir hunters laid coins on the tracks to be flattened by the weight of the car into collector's items; others jostled wildly in an effort to become "first" riders of the Muni.

It was a history-making event, for this bold experiment which San Francisco had undertaken was the first public-owned transit system in the United States. Thus a 23-year dream became a concrete fact.

The Panama Pacific International Exposition was given next priority in the inauguration of new lines. In 1913 the city acquired the Union Street line. The following year the Stockton "F" and the Van Ness "H" lines were built. By the time the Exposition opened in 1915, there were six lines providing service to it as well as to the residential areas of Cow Hollow and North Beach. Service was established on the "C" and "J" lines in 1917.

Fully one-third of the city's area lay unpopulated in 1912. That same year test borings were being made for the construction of an 11,920-foot tunnel under Twin Peaks. Six years later—on Sunday, February 3, 1918—the first "K" car passed through the longest streetcar tunnel in the world. It was a significant transit "breakthrough," bringing service as far west as St. Francis Circle to the undeveloped West-of-Twin Peaks area. Later this service was extended to form the "K" and "L" lines to meet the increasing transit needs of the growing districts. The "M" line was started in 1925.

The Sunset district—where the sand dunes were gradually surrendering to the marching rows of homes—was next to reap the benefits of public transportation. On Sunday, October 21, 1928, service on the "N" line started. The occasion was another San Francisco "gala," with thousands lining Duboce Avenue from Market to the tunnel and the Ferry Building siren emitting undulating shrieks of joy as the first streetcar headed west to the Sunset, the indefatigable Mayor Rolph again at the controls. By 1928, while the movies were advertising "talkies" and the Stock Market was unaware of the approaching year of the crash, the Muni had grown to a system of 1300 employees and 215 vehicles which were carrying 240,000 passengers daily.

San Francisco felt the full impact of the really "new" Muni on Sunday, July 3, 1949—a red letter day for transit—when the old streetcars on the Nos. 5, 6, 7 and 21 lines were replaced by trolley coach operation. On that same day service was inaugurated or extended on nine motor coach lines—Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 20, 25, 31, 55 and "H"-night. A study of the affected lines showed a 64-per cent increase in the frequency of peak-hour service, and the number of seats available on these lines during the peak riding hours was increased by 52 per cent. Subsequently, the open-ended "iron monster" streetcars on the "J," "K," "L," "M" and "N" lines were replaced by streamlined, one-man PCC ("President Conference Car") streetcars. The last of the two-man "iron monsters" operated on a scheduled run May 9, 1958, then rolled into retirement.

The postwar specter of the transit industry nationally has become the decline of passengers in inverse ratio to the increase of private transportation. The effect on Muni patronage has consistently been less than the national average due to its program of continued improvements in equipment and service and retention of a 15-cent fare with full transfer privileges. The fare is one of the country's biggest transit bargains, with only two other major cities, New York and New Orleans, charging comparable amounts.

Reason for the low fare is San Francisco's official policy to support transit as the least cost solution to the overall traffic problem. The policy is based on recognition of the Muni as a virtual "lifeline" between the heavily-populated outer districts and the vital downtown shopping and financial sections, an area small in size but giant in economic proportions since it comprises the major part of the city's tax base.

In San Francisco—with nearly the highest per capita riding habit in the United States—the system of today is so constructed that nine out of 10 people live within two blocks of a Muni route. To serve its passengers—some 670,000 each weekday—the Muni schedules 835 vehicles over 691 round-trip miles of route on 61 bus, trolley coach, streetcar and cable car lines. The little one-line system that started 50 years ago with the 10 streetcars proudly parading down Geary Street has grown to full size!

MUNI MEMO TO YOU—No. 9
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102
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